a window on the

NEW MORALITY

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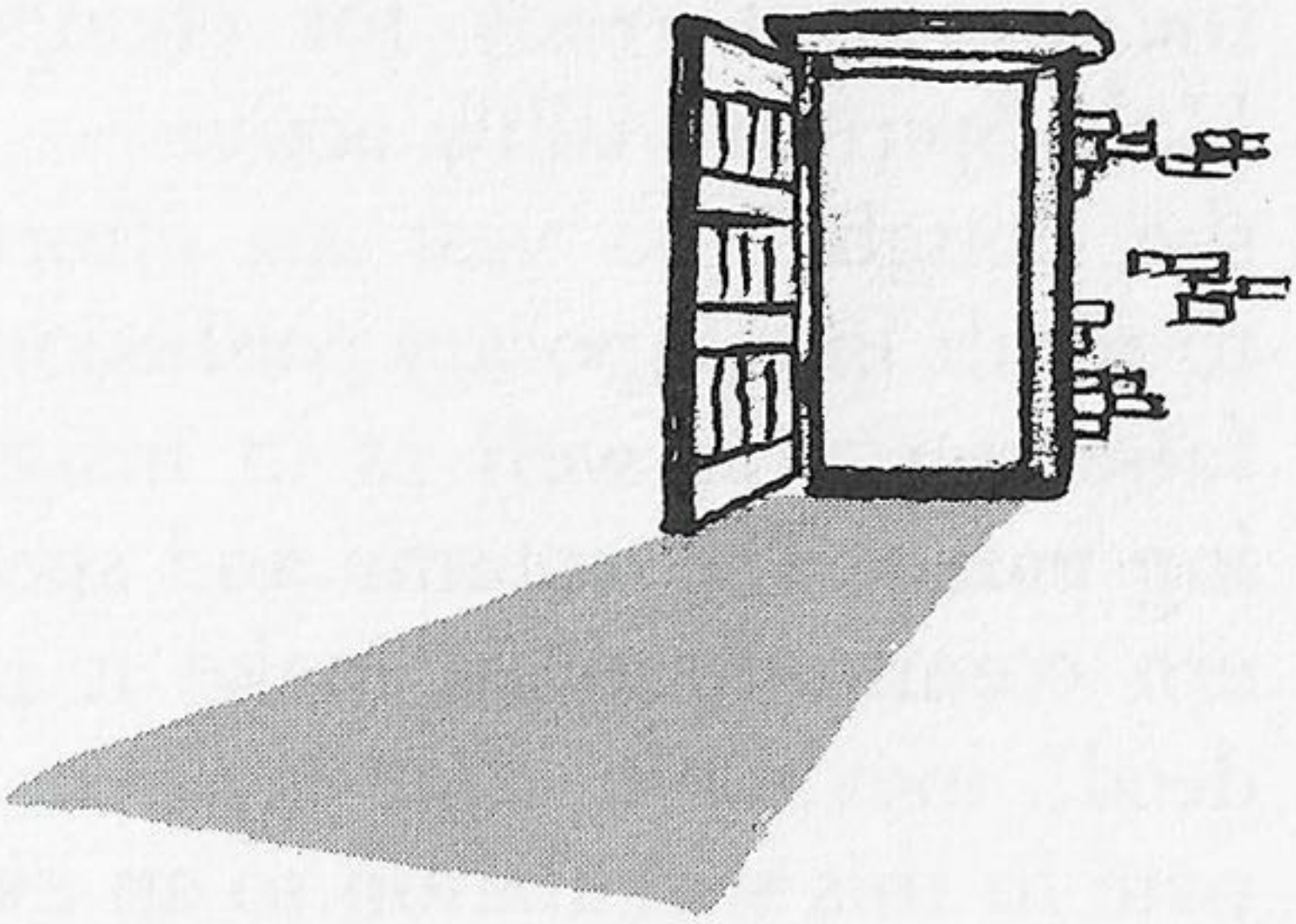
A WINDOW ON THE NEW MORALITY



In every decade there are a host of new movements. Some are simply fads. They are like popular tunes that keep being revived and played in the current tempo. But there are also new understandings of truth, or as Cardinal Newman would have put it, God's revelation to man is progressive as man is able to receive and comprehend it.

At the present time interest in theology, relatively dormant since the great upheavals of the Reformation period, has burgeoned, giving rise to new movements and intense re-evaluations of the Christian position. In part, of course, this is due to the extraordinary political and social upheav-

als of recent decades, but also, it would seem, the Christian community throughout the world is ready for change, and the Holy Spirit is visibly active — "leavening the dough." So vast an effort is bound to result in temporary confusion and many false starts, as well as in insights of lasting value. The volume and speed of modern communications make it possible, indeed, inevitable, for laymen to participate in this speculation to an extent which has not been seen since the stormy days of the fourth and fifth centuries, when the Church was forced to combat nascent heresies by formulating clearer statements about the nature of the Trinity, and particularly of Christ.

It is difficult for the ordinary Christian to distinguish immediately between the gold and the dross in all this activity, and hard even for theologians to guard against the excesses brought about by enthusiasm for the new approaches. Changing social attitudes and practices give rise to fresh approaches, but the content of some of the new thought is as old as man's first attempt to put himself in the center of the universe.

The most dramatic and controversial aspects of recent theological speculation have been crystalized as "the New Morality." Under this title we find everything from fresh formulations of deep and lasting truths to the crassest, most infantile approach to human relationships. Most of us are aware, perhaps painfully, that the *practice* of morality has been changing in some ways, while the *theory* until recently has not altered at all. Is this change simply a question of moral laxity, or is there some justification for it? We have a right to expect principle and practice to accord with one another among Christians. Some reasons for the disparity are fairly clear. The Victorian doctrine, for instance, that regarded physical matter as entirely evil, and consequently all pleasures, which has profoundly influenced the national conception of morality, merits the condemnation it is now receiving because of its false emphasis and its tendency to see problems too much in white and black, absolute, terms. Such a view is increasingly untenable in a heterogeneous society. Some two-thirds of the nation's population have left the relatively simple

conditions of the small town which was the norm a century ago, and now live in urban situations of unprecedented complexity and interdependence. The moral supports available in small-town society are no longer there for the majority of people, whose lives are anonymous by comparison, and who must face new problems of adjustment and find new ways of relating to other human beings. The findings of psychiatry have given us important new insights into subconscious motivation which also must be taken into account.

When spoken of by responsible people, what is the new morality? Perhaps an adequate illustration is a statement by the Professor of Christian Ethics at the Episcopal Theological Seminary in Cambridge, Massachusetts. He states that "as Christians we are commanded to love people — not principles." The "old morality" is an effort to "prefabricate our moral decisions by applying a lot of rules. The new morality among Christians throws all such rules aside and faces every situation with the determination to do the most loving thing possible in the circumstances. It deals with

problems of conscience without any law except the law of love in the great commandment to love God and your neighbor . . . Depending upon the circumstances, unmarried love could be infinitely more moral than married love; lying could be more Christian than telling the truth; stealing could be better than respecting private property. It always depends upon the situation."

Our first reaction may be one of scandal, since the professor uses the most shocking illustrations he can imagine. But after the emotions relax, we discover that all he is doing is making a statement of the basic principle of historic Catholic moral theology. In seeking to follow the will of God, man's own conscience must be his ultimate guide, and love must be his intent and motive. The action of man, in moral judgment, is always secondary to his motivation and intent.

Surprising to some is the discovery that it was our Lord who revealed to man that which has been called "the new morality." Until then, man's highest guide to action and relationship was the Ten Command-

ments. These were like a parent with a child. The child is not capable of understanding the deeper meaning of relationships, so you simply say "Don't do that." But Christ turned from the negative to the positive: "This do, and thou shalt live." He stated the principle of all action and all relationships: "Thou shalt love." "By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, that ye have love for one another." The Via Dolorosa, our Lord's Passion, began with His rejection of man-made laws which were touted as divinely inspired. His condemnation of the Pharisees is that they followed a thousand laws but did not love God or man. The "new morality" is hardly new.

However, as taught, encouraged, and practiced by many public figures, the consequences have been nearly disastrous. In an age of pre-adolescent preoccupation with the body (as evidenced by magazines such as Playboy, current movies, and best sellers), man would naturally interpret any change in moral thought as giving him carte blanche in the area of sex relationships. He is a little bit surprised to find that one of the oldest confidence lines in

seduction — "It's all right because we are in love"—has become the rationale of our age. The destructive effect of this movement has deeply affected modern youth. The U. S. Health Agency reports that in 1964 venereal disease increased 230% among teen-agers. Non-medically approved abortions last year in the United States amounted to over one million. Teen-age marriages and the almost inevitable divorce have skyrocketed. Similar increases in the number of youth of all classes affected by alcoholism, drug addiction, emotional breakdowns and suicide are the source of ever greater concern on the part of responsible educators and law enforcement agencies, not to mention bewildered parents who cannot understand what is happening to their children. Yet it is like lung cancer—we are just beginning to see the increase of the incidence. The full harvest is still fifteen to twenty years away. Not least of the serious effects is the intense emotional scarring and resultant hostility and cynicism of those who discover young that relationships which seemed to promise so much, have given little or nothing.

Now, what is the cause of the problem? If moral principle reaches its height in the basing all decisions and actions upon doing that which is most loving to all concerned, then why the growing chaos? It is because the advocates of dropping all discipline, self-restraint, and rules are laboring under two very false premises.

The first false premise is that man understands and is committed to obedience to the law of love. This is unfortunately palpable nonsense. All one needs to do is ask a teen-ager (or for that matter, an adult) to define love. There will be some head-scratching, and finally a statement which reveals romanticism, or infatuation, or mother or father fixation, or lust, or a host of other symptoms of neurotic needs; or else a learned and glib quotation from an excellent book. If mature love and the willingness to sacrifice oneself and one's own good for the good of others was the food necessary for existence on this earth, the average man would starve to death instantly!

We are asking man to do that for which he is unprepared and of which he is in a

sense incapable at this stage of his growth. So man's alternative is to translate the theological statements into principles on his own emotional level of experience. What a travesty of the truth as revealed by Jesus this can become! When a woman was brought to Him from the bed of adultery, He didn't say: "Now, it's all right because you probably have some love for each other." He said: "Neither do I condemn you; *go and sin no more.*" Complete physical relationship can no more be morally separated from the vows and responsibilities of Holy Matrimony and made to stand alone, than can Holy Communion be separated from the vows of Baptism and the responsibility of devotion to God in the daily life of the Christian. Sexual relationship is given to us by God as an outward and visible sign, and unless man is willing to assume responsibility for the well-being of the other before God, sex degenerates into that which makes one feel good, or gives one the impression of relating intimately to another person (even though this depth relationship proves to be momentary). The basic sin is that emphasis has been on a satisfying

experience rather than on the real and ultimate fulfillment of a person.

Our Lord did not deny the law, or say that it ought to be cast aside. He said that love was the completion of the law—law was kept within the action of love. What is happening is like suggesting that men be motivated by honesty and responsibility for others. They are encouraged, then, to ignore all traffic lights and signs. They are told: "You have gone far beyond the need of such restrictions and protections. Forget the city, state, and national laws and restraints. Do what to you seems right. Be true to yourself." Not many of us would like to live in a city of a million people who had been liberated from all laws, mores, and morals. The theory is true; but man's understanding and ability to commit himself in depth is an extremely important factor.

The second false premise is that man has evolved into a position of near emotional maturity, and can exercise lordship over his emotions and passions. Psychiatry immediately sticks the pin into this delusion. Man at best (as a norm) has a

very thin veneer or facade of sophistication tacked on top of the emotional reactions of adolescence. It doesn't require a visit to a cocktail party to see the veneer removed. Sit and listen a while to any group of men or women as they talk. Hear the subject matter, the level of the humor, the depth of the gossip, and the emotional involvement in trivia. The problems facing the adolescent, including aggressiveness, competitiveness, sensitivity of pride, defense of ego, herd instinct, — are all present and unresolved. This is not to demean man. In every generation a minority of individuals achieves an extraordinary degree of maturity. Their lives are both a joy to those who know them and a challenge to the rest of us. In them we glimpse the magnificent potential to which redeemed man, touched with grace, is heir. But surely it is obvious that to tell the ordinary human being that he is now free to be and do, without reference to objective rules, discipline and authority, is to invite the destruction of that person and of those around him.

The temptation to see the natural man as the measure of human perfection is not

new; this view is what made the emperor-worship of the official state religion in the Roman Empire seem not unreasonable to educated men of the time. In its present context the attitude derives from the rationalism of the 18th century. The underlying assumption is that "this world" is all there is—in fact, that God is either irrelevant or dead. The technological progress of the past two centuries has reinforced the view simply because so much more of the physical universe has been made susceptible to rational explanation. The unknown has been pushed back, and that tempts us to believe that further progress along the same lines will eventually eliminate it entirely, and render man free—independent of God.

The proponents of the New Morality are not, of course, trying to deny the existence of God, or of our ultimate depedence upon Him. They base themselves squarely upon the central teaching of Christ, the law of love, and claim for their view a closer conformance to it than that traditionally expounded by the Church. The commandment to love is the heart of the Gospel, and to carry out this command-

ment, one must take into consideration the requirements of each situation. Hence the appeal of the New Morality to contextual ethics—that circumstances entirely dictate the particularities of behavior, and that no prohibitive law can have universal validity.

It is true that Christ broke the Sabbath rule by healing a man on that day, that He denounced the Pharisees for their preoccupation with the law, that His whole life and teaching stress the principle of love above adherence to a code of law. But He also said that he had come, not to destroy the law, but to fulfill it. He adhered in His own life to the established religious observances, being "found frequently in the temple." Christ never broke a law because He felt it did not apply to Him, or because the law "didn't matter." His breaches of the law, like His admonitions to the Pharisees, are in the opposite direction: He amplifies the law, He shows its deeper meaning.

The emphasis laid on social and political reform by the New Morality should be taken to heart by Christians, for whom a vivid concern with these matters is plainly

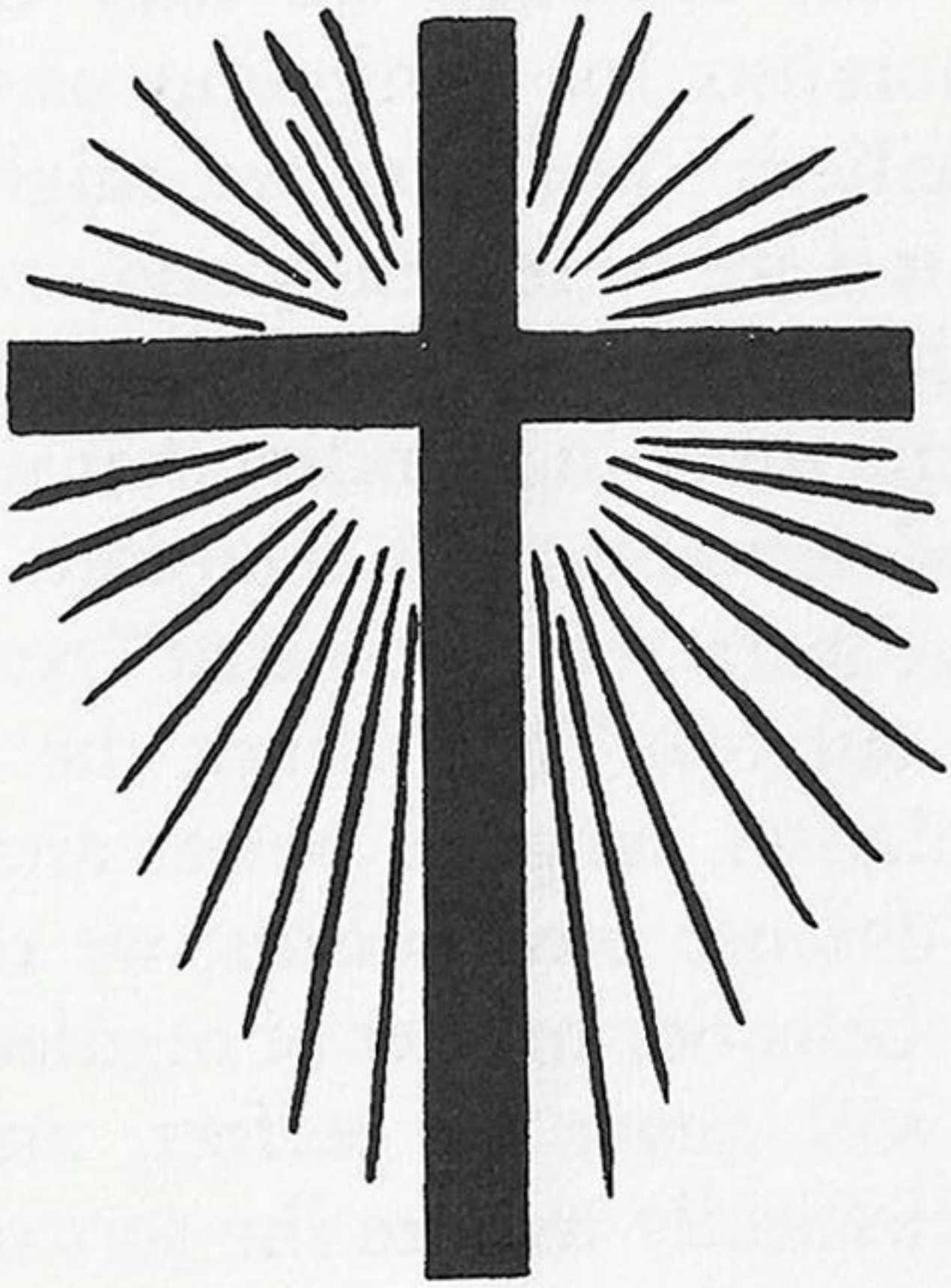
a duty too much neglected. The implied criticism of the Church is salutary. Certainly we cannot pretend to conform ourselves to the law of love without taking an interest in current public problems. But we must avoid identifying social and political activism with "real Christianity." For one thing the activist requires the balance provided by those with other vocations—the contemplative, the abstract thinker. Political activity and social reform cannot be regarded as ends in themselves for the Christian; they are valid concerns insofar as they make for the enlightenment, comfort and liberation of individual human beings.

The shallow conception of the Gospel message betrayed by some exponents of the New Morality with regard to its application to political and social problems is evident as well in their treatment of sexual questions. Here above all the tendency to regard man from a purely physical point of view is evident, to the neglect of the complexity of the human soul, and of the spiritual potentialities inherent in it. The redemptive and transforming power of discipline, with which everyone has had at

least some experience, can too easily be neglected and finally forgotten.

We may entertain the New Morality only with due caution, welcoming the adjustment it tries to effect between principle and practice, but remaining very wary of its pretensions to free us. We already know that perfect freedom is the service of God Who is Love, and not the service of ourselves, and although we may thank the new moralists for reminding us that "the letter killeth" and that we might indeed ignore it if we were totally and unreservedly at the disposal of the Holy Spirit, we must remember in humility that we are not all good servants, and therefore not free. Until we learn the lesson that "perfect love casteth out fear" and hence the need for self-adulation, tangible power and psychological defense mechanisms, we must submit our behavior to a set of regulating laws which will never be perfect, and which will periodically require the sort of searching re-evaluation to which we are now being uncomfortably subjected. Without the discipline imposed by the Law given to Moses, the Jews could not have prepared a homeland for Christ to be born in. By

His coming He gave a new dimension to that Law, as He gave us a new relationship with God. When our Lord said, "I am come that they might have life and have it more abundantly," it was an invitation to depth relationship with Him, and through Him to others—to all men.



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